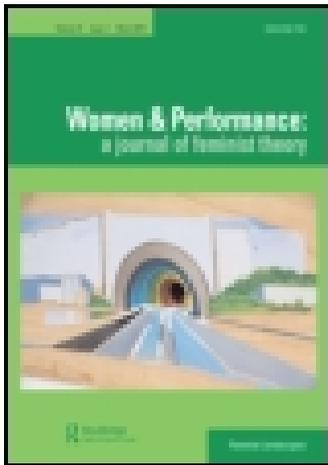


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Troubled air: the drone and doom of reproduction in SunnO)))’s metal maieutic

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This article examines aesthetic legacies and gendered histories of reproductive labor in the long, slow, reverb-heavy performances of the contemporary metal band SunnO))). Summoning aesthetic concepts of mimesis and sublimity, SunnO)))’s unique droning compositions suggest that the claim of “being metal” is bound up with the imperative of “bearing metal” – bearing in the sense of *surviving* as well as *delivering forth*. SunnO)))’s practice recalls a submerged connection between the aesthetic, the biological, and the material: a *longue durée* of reproduction that sounds like – feels like – doom. In this sense, what drags and drones in metal – and manifests in occult imaginary of dark effeminate monstrosity – is not outside the purview of a queer and feminist interest; rather, metal’s attempts to police its borders bespeak the common ground we share.

Keywords: reproductive labor; metal; sonic materiality; primitive accumulation; drone; doom

Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies. (Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 2004, 184)

[...] and troubled air gets out. (Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness”, 2008, 182)

Among some of the longer haired people I know, a question circulates that is both endless and imperative: is it metal? They never ask or seek to describe what metal *is*, but rather how something can have the quality of *being* metal – something like a t-shirt, or a car crash, or a vasectomy. As a quality of things, a state of being, metal emerges from these dialogs as an ethic, a lived and embodied practice of an aesthetic concern. At what could either be construed as the esoteric fringes or innovative core of the genre, this question constitutes metal’s very substance, posed by the music itself.

One band whose music regularly and emphatically poses such questions, and is perhaps emblematic of doing so in a contemporary metal scene, is the Seattle-derived and Los Angeles/Paris-based duo SunnO))). Pioneers of drone metal, a subset of the already rarefied

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doom metal, SunnO))) – who are Stephen O’Malley and Greg Anderson, usually in collaboration with guest musicians – play incredibly long, slow, and reverb-heavy compositions, often without vocals or drums, and always at volumes so loud that O’Malley has suggested they have a distinct tactilely oriented following: “people who are just like, I’m going to stand at the front of the stage for an hour and a half – can I take it? Will I wet my pants?” (Wray 2006).

“Being metal” is for SunnO))) bound up with the question of bearing metal: bearing in the sense of surviving – of “taking it,” withstanding the sound – but also in that other sense of *sustaining* or *delivering forth*. In addition to playing music, O’Malley and Anderson are founders of the influential experimental metal record label Southern Lord, which began as a platform to release their own work and now specializes in doom and drone metal subgenres. Yet even as a band, SunnO))) is already a type of platform: a conjecture that reproduces the genre. SunnO))) play what is metal about metal – the tones, drone, and feeling decanted from an aggregated 40-year past of chord progressions and drumbeats. Listening to them, metal becomes not only something *to bear* sonically but also something *that bears* aesthetically, as their onslaught of noise reproduces the droning intensity of an accumulated musical history. At the heart of the conjecture that there could be something “metal about metal” is a notion of mimesis: the idea that across each song, album, and band there is something imitated that gives each song, album, and band a familial resemblance or genre-specificity. SunnO)))’s seemingly abstract drone noise and doom affect thus constitute a mimetic technique: one wherein metal imitates metal; one that represents metal as itself. What is mimetically imitated in their compositions is not the particularity of instrumental refrains, but metal-ness as a general form or feeling – as, more specifically, a form and feeling of extremity. Metal-ness is always posed in the superlative: it is a question of being the most loud, the most hard, the most fast, the most harsh, the most punishing, the best, the greatest, forever and all eternity. It is this sublime of extremity that SunnO))) streamlines, hones, and reproduces as metal itself: an extremity edged with the promise of deliverance.

What is the difference between imitating metal and making it? Between sounding like metal and being it? What, exactly, is delivered through extremity? The questions that arise listening to SunnO))), questions that are posed sonically in the music, are questions we could ask more generally of aesthetic production. Mimesis and the sublime are most often invoked in aesthetic theory with an emphasis on representational remove and transcendence; yet listening to SunnO))), we can understand how both are premised on more subtle operations of the body that dramatically emerge in relation to the ethic and practice of metal.

Interrogating what it is to be metal on the aural, visual, and haptic levels of music, SunnO))) produces an understanding of aesthetics that, like the band, can be found at the esoteric fringe or innovative core of the discipline’s canonical works. Specifically, their music elucidates a figural specter that haunts even the earliest formulations of these concepts in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Longinus’ *On the Sublime*. SunnO)))’s deep mimetic technique, which reproduces metal as a genre, recalls Aristotle’s notion that mimetic power derives from the pleasure of understanding or recognition. For Aristotle, such pleasures are predicated on an awareness of one’s own body, which is either the thing recognized or the thing in relation to which the recognition of everything else takes place. Similarly,

SunnO)))’s replication of metal’s genre-defining extremity – its volumes, affects, and superlatives – recalls Longinus’ idiosyncratic formulation of the sublime, which phrases transcendence in the figurative language of biological reproduction. A reproductive legacy steeped in sexual metaphor, this sublime is not necessarily above bodies, but between them. In this sense, SunnO)))’s practice of drone doom metal activates a legacy of the aesthetic in which embodied sensations are implicit to figurative operations – a legacy that situates the aesthetic in relation to a bodily practice. More poignantly, the sound and feeling of doom summon a reproductive legacy of the aesthetic, one premised on a process of en fleshed delivery over the long time of generation.

As genre, metal contains within it a concept of *genus*: that is, a concept of the reproductive work that creates resemblance or kind. Genre is further subtended – etymologically and conceptually – by questions of gender, generation, and degeneracy. As Derrida writes in “The Law of Genre,” it comes into being through a “principle of contamination,” a splitting at the borderline that demarks the corpus, which he calls “invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole” (1980, 59). SunnO)))’s drone doom metal is an explicit negotiation of genre: summoning aesthetic concepts of mimesis and sublimity, it asks what of metal can be borne in simultaneously pared down and amplified compositions; it takes seriously metal’s harsh imperative *that one bear*. In this sense SunnO)))’s practice elucidates a submerged connection between the aesthetic and the biological: one that demonstrates how embodied feeling and bodily reproduction condition concepts of representation and deliverance.

The aesthetic and biological become estranged, however, in the history of capitalism that distinguishes the body’s capacity to reproduce and its capacity to produce value. This distinction preserves the category of “the aesthetic” amid what is otherwise merely material. As Marxist feminists have argued, reproductive labor only became discounted from the calculations of value as “mere material” through the gendering and racination of labor power – that capacity for work that can be bought and sold for a wage. In *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Silvia Federici (2004) gives an account of the horror of this discipline: its gynocidal and genocidal force from the witch-burnings of Western Europe to the carnage of colonial encounter. Insofar as metal’s genre-wide investment in horror and the occult in relation to this history of primitive accumulation, SunnO)))’s compositions summon not just one buried notion of reproduction, but two: one that is figural and undergirds Classical formulations of aesthetic notions of mimesis and the sublime; and the other that is historical, stemming from the advent of capitalism, that conditions the horror or monstrosity of reproductive work – the brutalization of those bodies made brute, made bare life fit only to bear.¹ To this end, we can see how the invagination of genre functions differently than the genealogic of inheritance: it is chiasmatic and capacious, making possible the co-presence of different historically contingent formulations. In the case of SunnO))), the genre work of metal offers two differently situated but co-presently resonant formulations of reproductivity.

For these reasons, I propose that SunnO)))’s music, premised on that dual sense of bearing, acts as a *maieutic*. Derived from the ancient Greek word for “obstetric,”² maieutics is a method of inquiry that performs a philosophical “midwifery” delivering an innate knowledge from the body. In Plato’s formulation of the maieutic in *Theaetetus* (2006, 161e), speech is the privileged medium of its epistemological production: a Socratic formulation, maieutics are a dialectical method of questioning that perform extended acts of

midwifery, attending to the long duration of deliverance. The maieutic in Plato marks a site of erasure that continues to bear on how we understand bodily and intellectual deliveries as distinct from one another (see Bar On 1994) – one where the reproductive capacity of the female body is transmogrified into the reproductive capacity of the male voice. Yet precisely for this reason, the maieutic offers a way in which to apprehend the legacy of gendered appropriation that conditions the distinction between bodily and aesthetic capacity – a legacy both perpetuated and troubled in SunnO)))’s heavy musical compositions. Insofar as the maieutic is performed through the sonic materiality and temporality of the interrogative – through a vocal performance of questioning – it offers a resonant way of thinking about the genealogy of questioning that constitutes metal as genre. Or to put it another way, metal and maieutics share a common concern, one that points to an erased history of reproductive labor: how the enduring sound of the question can *bear*. SunnO)))’s music – as a sonic mode of inquiry – delivers an entombed specter of reproduction that conditions aesthetic, ethical, and economic configurations of value historically produced as “innate.” In this sense, SunnO))) posit a metal maieutic that deals in necromancy, in satanic birth: it does not deliver something new, but perversely and diabolically brings something back.

The work of a metal maieutic is perhaps akin to what Elizabeth Freeman describes as temporal drag: a performance of anachrony that usefully distorts the present. For Freeman, temporal drag is a queer resource, that, like gender drag performance, proposes a model of generation that goes beyond the patrilineal order of the Oedipal family (Freeman 2010, 62–65). A pull backward, a regressive undertow, temporal drag offers “a way of forcing the present to touch its own disavowed past of seemingly outlandish possible future” (78). Importantly, however, metal is not queer drag performance: although it shares drag’s proclivity for decadent hair, stylized make-up, lavish costuming, and hyperbole, and is sometimes subject to the same charges of over-theatricality and hysteria, the comparison falls short when one considers how these tactics in metal have been used to shore up a heteronormative masculinity rather than trouble it, and – notably – to authorize extreme homophobic violence. By positing metal as a maieutic, I do not mean to make any claims about the intentions or politics of metal musicians or their fans – that work has been done elsewhere (see Weinstein 1991). Instead, I mean to perform a mode of analysis that attends to what political possibilities arise from the aesthetic and material experience of their music. I aim to understand how metal recalls how the aesthetic concepts of mimesis and the sublime are informed by a relationship to the body, as well as a material history of bodily suffering informs its brutal style.

What drags and drones in metal is not outside the purview of a queer and feminist interest; indeed, metal’s attempts to police its borders bespeak the common ground we share. The efficacy and horror of metal as a genre stems from its attempts to summon lost figures of reproduction: the embodied action that undergirds axiological inquiry; the raced and gendered history of labor that conditions how we are born, borne, and can bear. This summoning takes the form of an enduring interrogative, that perpetual question of “what is metal about metal?” As a hermeneutic, the maieutic brings together philosophy, metal, and feminism around what is a common question: how do we understand the difficult duration and historical discipline of delivery?

I. Mimetic reproductions

To call SunnO)))’s droning ambient compositions “mimetic” appears at first grossly inaccurate, as “mimetic music” would seem to be strictly that which imitates the “real sounds” of life. Yet mimetic music is not all birdcalls. It is also, in the case of SunnO))), that demon call which summons metal to itself: the call recalls a material history of an affect, reproducing metal-ness through an imitation of what metal has up until now been. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Arthur Schopenhauer posits what we could understand as a deep mimesis of music. Music, he writes, is distinct from other arts, for “in it, we do not recognize the copy, the repetition, of any Idea of the inner nature of the world” ([1958] 1966, 256). That we do not perceive the remove of representation does not mean mimesis is not operating; on the contrary, this lack of perception is premised on music’s extreme efficacy as representation. For Schopenhauer, music is the most direct expression of that animating life force – the Will – of which the whole world is but representation. As he goes on to explain,

[...] music differs from all other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomena, or, more exactly, of the will’s adequate objectivity, but is directly a copy of the will itself, and therefore expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon. (262)

For Schopenhauer, music expresses the “thing-in-itself,” which derives from a Kantian understanding of noumena: the Will as distinguished from the phenomena of individual wills. It copies a sense of being – it is at once a mimetic and metaphysical mechanism.

Metal is, of course, no noumena – it is, as I will argue, a material, aesthetic, and affective expression of historically resonant brutality. Yet what is useful in Schopenhauer’s formulation is the depth of mimetic expression he assigns music: it copies something that is not immediately present, but something that persists over time. Seeking what is metal about metal, SunnO)))’s compositions recall Schopenhauer’s formulation of music’s deep mimesis in that their metal seeks to represent a sense of being directly. The “being” of metal, however, is not a transcendent nor timeless idea, but instead a long aggregation of physical and emotional feelings: the sensate effects of its speeds and slowness – the rapid power chords, growling vocals, dense drumbeats, or low bass frequencies that produce feelings of harshness, heaviness, and darkness. This mimetic work does not emerge through lens of authorial intention – that is, through a consideration of what SunnO)))’s O’Malley and Anderson might *mean* to convey in their aesthetic choices. Rather, it is enacted through the band’s performative strategies: that is, in what SunnO)))’s aesthetic and music materially *do* to the listening body – which O’Malley and Anderson often astutely observe. Similarly, the music’s performative action is not premised on a historical literacy of the listener but on the haptic experience of listening. One does not need to know of the history of primitive accumulation in order to be constituted by it, in order to feel its weight.

SunnO))) began in 1998 as simple imitation – as a two-man tribute band to another Seattle-based drone metal band called Earth (Wallace 2012) – yet they quickly shifted to a more complicated strategy of performing a legacy of metal that Earth embodied drone. In several early shows in 2000, O’Malley and Anderson decided to play from behind an

imposing wall of stacked amps, choosing to “make the amps the band” (Wallace 2012). These amps have, since the group’s formation, formally dominated the band, as the name “SunnO)))” refers to a brand of amp Earth favored – the “O)))” of their logo suggestive of the sensate opening and cosmic enormity of volume itself. As they continued touring, O’Malley and Anderson began wearing long hooded black robes and using dry ice and fog machines to envelop the stage with a miasmatic haze – a reference to metal’s longstanding occult and ritual imagery as well as a compositional strategy for de-emphasizing their individual presence, allowing them to blend into a chromatically saturated *mise-en-scène*. They’ve maintained this style even as their practice has opened up to include numerous collaborators. Their rotating cast of metal, avant-garde, and classical musicians is shrouded in the uniformity of black hooded robes.³ By making the amps the band, by blending into the fog, Anderson and O’Malley blur the distinction between the body and its surround, so what is mimetically represented and amplified is metal as *a distributed sense of form and feeling*. Metal is atomized as a quality of light and air, a heaviness that hangs, drones, darkens the entire space of performance, filling the room with something thick.

SunnO))) is mimetic in both deep and real time. They imitate metal-ness as it has been produced as a musical genre, as well as metal-ness as it is performed by the shifting state of the bodies in their audience – shifts that their sound creates and reflects. At the live show, the music acts directly on flesh: the frequency of sound imitating the affects and movements of bodies and vice-versa, each imprinting the other. This “live” mimesis becomes part of the affective repository that their deep mimetic technique reflects. Live tours become the source for recorded albums, or as O’Malley said of the chiaroscuro of albums between 2003 and 2006 entitled *White1*, *White2*, and *Black One*: “a lot of the material was developed as seeds of improvisation which stuck in our minds, and the spirit of the music, and then developed into those tracks” (Stannard 2009a). The sound bears both an imitative and intimate relation to the bodies it acts upon, and this relation extends beyond the live encounter, forged and re-forged across the live show and recorded album, through the “seed” that becomes “spirit,” between the band, their amps, and their audience. The feedback loops of SunnO)))’s drones are in this sense mimetic, as they imitate the feedback loop between audience and performers in the live performance, in the feedback loop between live and recorded compositions, and the feedback loop of influence that constitutes “genre” in general.

The centrality of resonant feeling in SunnO)))’s deep mimetic technique recalls a submerged figurative legacy in Aristotle’s analysis of mimesis in *Poetics*. For Aristotle, mimesis’ effect – though produced through plot structures – is predicated on its relation to a body through action. As an aesthetic technique, mimesis articulates a relationship between the figure of the body and the figurations of representation. In the feedback loop of their compositions, SunnO))) dramatize the proximity of intimacy and the remove of imitation, that is, the ambivalence of representation’s dual character. SunnO)))’s compositions make resonant this figural force of the mimetic, troubling the figure/ground relations that structure representational schemas. Extended through the electric possibility of drone doom metal’s imposing amplifiers, Aristotle’s performative aesthetic inquiry into the question of force takes on temporal dimensions in relation to metal performance practice. In this sense, SunnO)))’s drone doom metal troubles the notion of correspondence that sutures representation in a broader sense: the logic that

forges a connection between aesthetic imitations and political proxy, between the body and the body politic.

In the introduction to his 1996 translation of *Poetics*, Malcolm Heath explains why he breaks with tradition to translate mimesis as “imitation” rather than “representation.” Describing the limitations of the latter, he asserts that the term representation “fails to capture [. . .] similarity which does not rest wholly on convention” (Aristotle 1996, xiii). Heath’s distinction suggests that an essential element of the original Greek term (μίμησις) is its capacity to produce surprising recognitions: that mimesis need not representationally make *meaning* in a conventional sense, but rather, must create *relations*, imitating so as to invoke presence. In the case of the mimetic depiction of people, such imitation would have to relate to the materiality of people, that is, to the body. In Aristotle’s text, “understanding” (Aristotle 1996, 48b) is the mechanism of this relation, making mimesis possible, natural, and pleasurable:

Imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood [. . .] so does the universal pleasure in imitations [. . .] The reason for this is that understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it. This is the reason people take delight in seeing images; what happens is that as they come to view them they come to understand and work out what each thing is (e.g. This is so-and-so). (48b)

To understand a figurative mimetic image is to invoke the corporeality with which the viewer engages with the world. Understanding is not only a matter of a conceptual or linguistic identification (the ability to say “This is so-and-so”) but also a sensate one, wherein the viewer not only knows, but feels – or perhaps more specifically, knows precisely *by* feeling.

As a parenthetical aside to his larger point about tragedy, Aristotle notes that poetic language itself developed mimetically through this mode of embodied engagement. Nestled in his well-known analysis of tragic form is the idea that poetry’s imitative force resides not only in its content, but also the metrical materiality of its language, which retains the imprint of the body: trochaic feet that like the early Greek tragedies are akin to dance, and the iambic verse of later work structured by the rhythm of speech (Aristotle 1996, 49a). As he notes,

(They used tetrameters at first because the composition was satiric in manner, and more akin to dance. But when speech was introduced nature itself found the appropriate form of verse, iambic being the verse-form closest to speech. There is evidence of this: we speak in iambs in conversation with each other very often, but rarely dactylic hexameters – and only when we depart from the normal conversational tone.) (49a)

Tragedy’s versified shift from the dancing body to the speaking body relates the metrical force of language to the rhythms of embodiment, as the iambic is produced by a mouth’s range of movement – by the ebb and flow of limited breath. To this end, figuration is a strategy of imitation but is also an inherent element to all imitation, which in order to act as imitation, acts through and on a body – not only in a phenomenological sense, but also in a formal one. Mimesis works not only through the aperture of individual feeling, but also through the material configurations premised on the always-prior condition of embodiment. Figuration is therefore a formal interaction between premise, sensation, and action.

Mimesis thus functions through the recognition of a body in its image; it is a recognition predicated on sensational resonances that are at the same time formal, a reverberation between the corporeality of the body and the materiality of representation. The sound SunnO))) produce imitates the frequencies of the human body so well as to create a violent rumbling in the human. The tactile element of their music – the sound so loud that it registers on the skin, literally buzzing the organs, stifling the breath – captures exactly what is mimetic about mimesis, which is to say its unique mechanism of figurative action, its haptic rate. What is often overlooked in Aristotle’s formulation is not simply its performative relationship to the body, but also the fact that this performative relationship entails the exercise of force. By imitating its subject, by forging a material relationship, mimesis presses upon its source, coercing a connection, burrowing in. The question of “being metal” that arises in SunnO)))’s distinctive style of drone doom is, in a significant sense, the very question posed by mimesis, as it is a question of force – a question that asks whether a representation demands a body, and whether the body, upon encountering such representation, is moved. What Aristotle poses as the “pleasure of understanding” is the body’s affirmative answer to this question, and the answer is as literal as a bass vibrating the genitals, as sound tingling on the tongue, prickling the skin.

II. The heavy sublime

The tactile pleasure of SunnO)))’s music is inseparable from its heaviness – the weight of low bass frequencies that act on the body, the weight of mimetic bodily relations feeding back. Such heaviness bears an emotional load, one characterized in metal genre parlance as “doom;” yet as O’Malley observes, the “the main emotion is transcendence, when it’s done right” (Stannard 2009a). The single gesture that might constitute dance at a SunnO))) show – the slow upward movement of a contorted hand – suggests that this transcendent feeling of heaviness is palpable, and the seeming contradiction of a heavy transcendence recalls questions of uplift and affect have been theorized in aesthetic theory as the sublime.

Their 2009 album *Monoliths & Dimensions* concretizes this connection through collaboration with a Viennese women’s choir led by Jessika Kenney. On the second song on the album, “Big Church [Megszentségteleníthetlenségéskedéseitekért],” the women sing in glissandos, creating effects of ascendance and transcendence that recall a history of church choir music. The song alternates between the women’s voices droning guitars, echoic bell sounds, and the deep growls and rapid incantations of vocalist Attila Csihar. Csihar’s voice reaches a crescendo at the end of the song – his incantations becoming faster and faster as the growls and guitar drone that underlie them become louder and more intense. This saturation of speed and sound creates a feeling of heavy uplift, dramatized at the very end of the song, when Csihar and the guitars abruptly fall silent – something in you falls with them. The music’s affect of long and heavy transcendence is further emphasized in the bracketed part of the song’s title, “Megszentségteleníthetlenségéskedéseitekért.” An agglutinated Hungarian word, it means something like, “due to your (plural) continuing ability not to be desecrated.”

The palpability of SunnO)))’s heavy sublime recalls Longinus’ early treatise *On the Sublime*, where aesthetic passage enacts metaphysical passage, or as he writes, “a lofty

passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself" (1890, I.4) Of course, the language with which Longinus elaborates "being taken out of oneself" remains decidedly embodied. As the occasional obscenity of H.L. Havell's translation makes explicit, this language is one of sexuality and reproduction. Passages are, for example, "pregnant," (VII.2) and sublimity travels as a lineage, yielding figures such as Plato, "who from the great fountain-head of Homer's genius drew into himself innumerable tributary streams" (XIII.3). This language of sexual reproduction marks the body's simultaneous presence and escape in the concept of the sublime, for it is a figurative mode that tracks a figure literally moving through the text. The body, parenthetical yet central to Aristotle's mimesis, is even more fugitive in Longinus' concept of the sublime, circulating as the figurative language of reproductive or genealogical force: as not the realization of a body, but its perpetual promise and deferral, capture, and escape. This fugitive figural circulation recapitulates the sublime's own temporality. As Longinus describes, the sublime is something attained by an awareness organized as legacy, an orientation toward historical example and an aspiration toward the future ages of remote posterity. As he writes:

For by our fixing an eye of rivalry on those high examples they will become like beacons to guide us, and will perhaps lift up our souls to the fulness of the stature we conceive [...] Yet more inspiring would be the thought, With what feelings will future ages through all time read these my works? If this should awaken a fear in any writer that he will not be intelligible to his contemporaries it will necessarily follow that the conceptions of his mind will be crude, maimed, and abortive, and lacking that ripe perfection which alone can win the applause of ages to come. (XIV.1–3)

Invoking a concept of generationality, the "beacons" of history and the promise of "future ages," Longinus maintains that the sublime is something that occurs outside the body, yet positions it not as above bodies, but between them. He instructs us to "lift up our souls to the fulness of the stature we conceive," and in so doing, fulfill a reproductive promise of the sublime that both preexists and extends beyond our own limited lifetime.

Through this metaphor of conception, Longinus transposes artistic creation onto an idea of sexual reproduction. The process of reproduction figures the body in different temporalities. Longinus invokes the body as both here-and-now and as not-yet-here, as provocatively splayed out over a notion of cyclical, reproductive time. The sublime thus consists not of "abortive" conceptions, but reproductive ones. Yet as Longinus describes it, the sublime is a conservative impulse, predicated on the conservation and propagation of something that pre-dates and moves through us; it is not a conception of the new. Sublime beauty arises not through a process of production, but through reproduction: through not only a connection to the body, but as an extension of that relation which produces bodies – the mode and mechanism of reproduction, organized as lineage. Describing what is decidedly not the sublime, Longinus writes that "all these glaring improprieties of language may be traced to one common root – the pursuit of novelty in thought" (V.7) To this end, not just tragedy, but aesthetics in general are, as Aristotle postulates, "concerned with a limited number of families" (1996, 54a), for they always return to the familiar body, either in the mimetic moment of recognition, or in the reproductive impulse of the sublime. The body, which was the site of mimetic understanding for Aristotle, thus becomes animated and pluralized in time.

Another way to understand SunnO)))’s heavy sublime is to understand it as heavy with the weight of musical reference and lineage. As Frances Morgan (2009) proposes in a review in *frieze* magazine, SunnO))) is a band that makes “metal about metal, perhaps as a way of highlighting the often overlooked artistry and sonic innovation of the form.” From their beginnings as a tribute band to the ambitious inclusion of choirs and orchestral arrangements, SunnO))) makes music from within the genre of metal, a genre marked, as Morgan proposes, by sonic innovation. Yet such innovations are always intended to distill and amplify what came before, maintaining a tradition. In a review for *Artforum*, Jan Tumlir suggests that SunnO)))’s investment in genre, even when manifest as a reverence for the genre’s internal innovation, is in fact inherently conservative: an esotericism always articulated to the core. As he writes:

The stripped-down guitars-only lineup, the sluggish tempo that decelerates familiar hard-rocking riffs into alien drone-scapes, the conflation of abject and sublime, asceticism and excess – all of it comes from Earth, who, in turn, took their name from the band that would become Black Sabbath, and who clearly worship at that (upside-down) altar. (2006, 98)

That upside-down altar that is metal’s bloodline of genre. Metal is in this sense too about limited number of families. Through their drone doom experiments, SunnO))) recalls metal’s history in the present, performing familial and reproductive acts of maintenance and perpetuation. Metal’s contours emerge precisely through this reproductive relation: through a shared history of listening, an audio-consanguinity.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant reconfigures the sublime to a dynamic of making and unmaking. For him, the sublime entails a “vibration,” or “rapid alternation or repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object,” “an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself” (1987, 115). The sublime’s propensity to unmake complement a psychic process of making and unmaking, which Julia Kristeva theorizes in *Powers of Horror* as abjection. As she writes, “The abject is edged with the sublime” (1982, 12); for her, the sublime is that which expands and overstrains us, whereas the abject encroaches, threatening us with non-differentiation, with something that recalls the engulfing materiality of the maternal body once violently expelled, rejected, in order for a “self” to cohere. There is, as she goes on to write, an “abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself” that exists at both poles: it is the abyss of an abjected pre-subjectivity and the abyss of aesthetic extremity, a thing at once terribly grotesque and terribly beautiful, a thing both at the fringe and at the core of oneself.

Sound, too, has recently come to be theorized as a propensity for violent making and unmaking. Examining the advent of acoustic weaponry in his book *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Steve Goodman theorizes this propensity “an ontology of vibrational force,” that is, “a vibratory nexus [that] exceeds and precedes the distinction between subject and object, constituting a mesh of relation” (2012, 82–83). Vibration troubles subject/object relations insofar as it operates as excess – and this operation of excess is not unlike the operation of abjection, as both threaten the border of the body. Doom metal reverberates between corporeality and subjectivization, enacting a bodily and material persistence, which not only references the bodily operations of reproduction, but is also itself a form of reproductivity. At the same time, the sublime sonic heaviness of

doom metal formalizes this ontological capacity of vibration as leaden with material history – as one that recalls that abject threat of excess historically attributed to women, witches, demons, and other dark effeminate monsters.

SunnO))) experience the heavy sublime of their metal practice as a form of reproduction. Rejecting the idea that their music enacts a feeling of decay, O'Malley orients the band's work around an idea of sustenance. As he notes,

Decay leads to an end. "Sustain" is actually the word more appropriate. [...] We were trying to create a sustained sound. This is why the tracks are as long as they are, why the speed of the compositions is so absurdly slow, that's why the tuning's lower. [...] But on the other hand, it's not about slowing something down, because we're still in the same timeframe, and then that gets even more interesting, actually, with the live experience, because there's a real different sense of time at our concerts and stuff, I think. The sensory overload can create a different space, and a different perception. (Wallace 2012)

While the idea of "decay" is part of a conventional hardcore parlance – an idea evocative of death, destruction, and degradation – O'Malley proposes sustenance to be a more metal concept. What is sustained in SunnO)))'s music is not only the sound but also the feeling of metal. These are maintained in the duration, saturation, and extremity of the drone. Slowness is not just an effect, but a formal measure of the sound's extended duration, which as O'Malley hints, re-perspectives the space of perception. Through sustained sound, the timeframe of the present comes into relation with the vastness of the past and future, with what is the horizon of a sustained, echoic sound: the timelessness of eternity. The sound of heavy metal sustains the inheritance of heavy metal, an aesthetic lineage invested in the brutality, enormity, and perpetuity of reproduction.

III. Dark deliveries

One of the influences for SunnO)))'s drone doom metal is the infamously problematic sub-genre of black metal: a type of metal affiliated with high rasping vocals, experimental song structures, the stylized make-up known as "corpse paint," extreme performance techniques such as blood letting, as well as Satanism, church-burning, and several highly publicized murders in Norway in the late 1990s. SunnO))) collaborates with numerous black metal musicians, most regularly with Attila Csihar from the iconic black metal band Mayhem, who has appeared on five full-length albums and performs with them live. Their 2005 album *Black One* was explicitly inspired by the genre, and featured black metal vocalists Malefic (aka Xasthur) and Wrest (aka Leviathan). In the second song on the album, "It Took the Night to Believe," you can hear the signature tremolo of black metal guitars underneath SunnO)))'s characteristic drone; the third song, "Cursed Realms (Of the Winterdemons)," is a cover of black metal band Immortal; the title of the final song, "Báthory Erzsébet" is a reference to another black metal band Bathory. Yet what is specifically "black metal" about this album cannot be reduced to these overlaps.

The black metal-ness of *Black One* comes across more in the way "Báthory Erzsébet" sounds and feels, which is an effect of the way it was produced and the deeper history it references. The 16-minute track begins with the somnolent echo of bells, which shifts around the seven-minute mark into grittier guitar drones. At around eight minutes, Malefic's

rasping screaming wailing vocals come in – an effect produced, according to the band, by locking the claustrophobic Malefic in a casket with a microphone. According to reviews of the album (Stosuy 2005), the song title is not only a reference to a black metal band, but also a historical reference to Erzsébet (Elizabeth) Báthory, a sixteenth-century Hungarian countess accused of torturing and killing hundreds of girls, guided by the belief that bathing in and drinking the blood of virgins could restore her youth. Rumored to be a lesbian, a vampire, and a witch, she was immured in her castle as punishment for her crimes – a common punishment of the time, where the accused was sealed into a room while still alive, the doorways permanently sealed shut (Craft 2009). Báthory, as a historical figure and as a reference between bands, belongs to an affect-world of metal. To the bands and fans interested in her story, the actual historical details of her life and crimes are less important than the extremity of the occult mythos that surrounds her. She is not necessarily a site of shared knowledge but a name for shared feeling.

This affect-world of occultism and extreme brutality recalls another historical backstory to the Erzsébet Báthory legend: one that has to do with the transition from feudalism, the consolidation of empire, the patrilineal passage of wealth and property. Indeed, this is the backstory of every witch, or as Silvia Federici suggests in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, the general condition of the witch's historical emergence. As Federici identifies, the witch is the monstrous feminine figure historically abjected from the sexual division of labor; she is the excised excess that conditions the productive/reproductive couple. The witch is at once a racialized and gendered figure, produced as animating exclusion from both the marriage and labor contract, which condition capital. As Federici asserts, the figure of the witch – a figure imagined as both decrepity nonproductive and preternaturally reproductive – is both *in excess of* and *the enabling ground for* the advent of wage labor and the condition of slavery. As she writes,

[...] the definition of blackness and femaleness as marks of bestiality and irrationality conformed with the exclusion of women in Europe and women and men in the colonies from the social contract implicit in the wage, and the consequent naturalization of their exploitation. (2004, 200)

Counter-posed to the enclosed temporality of the contract and its speech act of consent – which are both undergirded by the non-contractual and non-consensual reproductive labor of enslaved women – is an imagination of the curse: that magical incantation that bypasses the due diligence of labor to nonetheless “work” all too well. The witch holds out the promise of what it is to both *curse* and *be cursed*. Always already guilty, she is always already rendered in relation to law, for which she is also the condition of possibility. Virgin-killer, baby eater, the witch is a receptacle for a diabolical reproductive force, for the monstrous hybrids and demon hordes that proliferate under the cover of night. Hers is a contract without the measure of the wage, an eternal pact with the devil. Hers is a back branded with the mark of an eternal servitude more binding than earthly enslavement, a secret mark obscured in – but at the same time evidenced by – her long hair:

According to the standard procedure, the accused were stripped naked and completely shaved (it was argued that the devil hid among their hair); then they were pricked with long needles all over

their bodies, including their vaginas, in search for the mark with which the devil presumably branded his creatures (just as masters in England did with runaway slaves). (Federici 2004, 185)

The long hair of the witch remains materially present in the long hair of the black metal musician. His high rasping vocal sounds invoke her voice, which escapes its historical enclosure. The mostly white, mostly male, mostly heterosexual world of black metal⁴ is, as many of the bands explicitly express, a reaction to what they understand as the Christian colonization of a prior Pagan nationhood.⁵ Black metal deploys the aesthetics and affects of the occult as part of this ideological project – and in this sense, invokes a material history of interest to queer, feminist, and people of color projects. For the specter of witches not only animated and disciplined the reality of domestic servitude and slavery, but remains imbricated with the reproductive labors of family and nation.⁶

There is a lot that cannot be overlooked about black metal – its troubling relationship to Fascism and neo-Nazi movements, its homicidal history, its implicit homophobia, racism, and misogyny. My consideration of how black metal circulates in Sunn)))’s compositions does not intend to minimize this history, nor is it part of an effort to reclaim, re-appropriate, or recuperate it. Instead, I ask how the history of black metal invokes another history that is not named – one that is properly the subject of my feminist inquiry: the historical disciplining of reproductive labor under capitalism. This history echoes in metal – rightly – as horror, for as Federici and other Marxist feminists, black studies scholars, and trans-Atlanticists have detailed, it was horrifically violent. I am interested in how, by embracing the aesthetics of this horror, metal homeopathically⁷ produces it as something more than “lack,” something more than absence, something more than the mark of attempted eradication. That is to say, I am interested in how horror becomes the sound of the reproductivity it always was: that long drone sound that bespeaks of a process of sustaining and enduring. Doom is the sound of long time – of too much time, which is the temporality of the legal sentence and diabolical curse, but also a temporal abundance, measured in generational cycles, that prefigures both sublimity and life.

Fred Moten’s influential 2008 article “The Case of Blackness” shares some of these concerns, and has been instructive in its critical approach. Considering the fifth chapter of Franz Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* entitled “The Fact of Blackness,” Moten asks how black is more than absence, more than an impossible ontology: how black social life can and does exist. Moten opens by saying that: “The cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place” (2008, 177). Considering the distinction between an object (which counterposes the subject) and the thing (which exists in apposition to their relation), Moten writes:

Perhaps the thing, the black, is tantamount to another, fugitive sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object’s vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out. The air of the thing that escapes enframing is what I’m interested in – an often unattended movement that accompanies largely unthought positions and appositions. (182)

As Moten makes clear in his discussion of Cecil Taylor’s jazz and Piet Mondrian’s *Victory Woogie Boogie* (a late neoplastic composition of layered primary colors and broken

borderlines which for Moten is “all black” (189)) this troubled air is a type of music: it is the sound of black social life that escapes what would contain it, a “chromatic saturation,” that renders Taylor’s black music and Mondrian’s “black” painting full of color and life. These works are, importantly for Moten, unlike the monochrome black paintings of Ad Reinhardt who “cannot, or refuses to, hear, if you will, a certain chromatic saturation that inhabits black as that color’s internal, social life” (Moten 2008, 199). I understand the blackness of black metal that resonates in SunnO)))’s drone doom compositions as not like Reinhardt’s “‘dark absolute of freedom’ and an idea of formality” (Moten 2008, 193), but as something closer to Moten’s idea of troubled air, already full of a “mixed capacity for content that is not made” (184). This troubled air is chromatically saturated, fogged, and filthy with the fecundity of witches, heavy with the reproductive legacies that are more than a history of enthrallment insofar as they are a capacity for escape. As Anderson noted in an interview, it was the “aesthetics and atmospheres” (Stannard 2009b) of black metal that the band sought to recreate – not its musical structures, or its iconography, but rather – like the sound of Malefic’s voice from inside the casket, like the legend of Báthory that survived immurement – a fugitive resonance.

While O’Malley was perhaps more specifically interested in black metal as a genre, having made black metal fanzines in the early 1990s (Stannard 2009a), Anderson describes his interest as more general:

I mean, I’m into dark music, man, it doesn’t matter whether it’s country or jazz or pop or whatever. I like dark music, I’m attracted to it. That’s something that gets me right away and obviously that music has that quality running through it. It’s dark, y’know? It’s heavy in its own way. I think you can find heaviness in all kinds of different ways, it doesn’t have to be riffs with a plodding rhythm behind it, the typical heaviness. There are different ways and forms of heaviness, and I’m attracted to that. (Stannard 2009b)

And indeed this darkness finds another appositional form on *Monoliths & Dimensions*, which claims a free jazz influence. The last track on the album, “Alice,” is dedicated to Alice Coltrane, the second wife of John Coltrane, a jazz pianist, organist, and harpist. It is SunnO)))’s attempt, according to Anderson, to perform a “real direct feel” of her music (Stannard 2009b) – an instance of their deep mimetic technique. The song begins quietly, and then slowly builds, ending with the twinkling harp sounds and soft exhalations of a trumpet – sound that is at the same time air thick with life. Whether O’Malley and Anderson are overtly interested in the social and political experience of a black female musician, or aware of the raced and gendered history of primitive accumulation that continues to organize the racialization and gendering of labor over time seems besides the point; their music – in its material compositions, its negotiation of temporality and chromatic saturation – nonetheless reproduces such experience as sensation and feeling.

The affect of metal that so many people find off-putting – the sentiment of suffering, the emotional investment in the painful and the heavy – is in fact an affect of an aesthetic and political tradition, circulating in the various reproductive labors that structure its operation. These reproductive labors sound like, feel like, doom. For what is drone but the unending echo of generational potential? And what is doom but the repetitive cycle of reproduction that both taunts yet sustains the artist? The heaviness of metal resonates with the weight of

aesthetic lineage, and the mimetic technique of a band like SunnO))) allows us to feel this weight. Metal mimetically touches the dark animal bodies – the witches, demons, and heretics – that populate its broader imagery in a historically profound sense. Metal makes audible an enduring material condition of reproductive labor extracted through the brutal disciplining of the sexual division of labor and its concomitant racialization. By lingering in sustained drones, SunnO)))’s music arrests the body in an unresolved reverberation between corporeality and subjectivization – an arrest that is the material history of gendered and raced subjugation, an arrest enacted as a dark and feminine excess that escapes.

SunnO)))’s metal maieutic emerges in its practice of extreme and extended sound, which delivers the connate propensity for deliverance. As Diotima of Matinea instructs Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*,

All human beings are pregnant in body and in mind, and when we reach a degree of adulthood we naturally desire to give birth. We cannot give birth in what is ugly, only in what is beautiful. Yes, sexual intercourse between men and women is a kind of birth. There is something divine in this process; this is how mortal creatures achieve immortality, in pregnancy and in giving birth. (Plato 1999, 206c)

The human is always “pregnant” insofar as it persists through a cyclical bearing forth – maternity being but one kind of this propensity to bear. Reproduction here is not a metaphor, but a material persistence or sustenance in time: reproduction is the physical process of engaging extended time. It is a generational and generating temporal operation, an operation that apprehends “immortality.” And as Diotima insists, “beauty” – or the aesthetic more broadly – offers one such model of delivery.

Metal delivers in darkness what has been historically disciplined as darkness. It delivers the heavy genealogical weight of that history as sonic materiality and affect: as drone and doom. Drone – the extended time of the unending, unwaged, unmeasured labor that is reproductive labor. Doom – the temporality of a certain future, of inexorable fate, of a reproductive horizon. Metal belongs to a legacy of aesthetics that insists upon a plurality of material relation between the body and its representation – a legacy that attempts to reach out and touch flesh, move limbs, and *do things* in a general sense. For this reason, metal is not only a mode of aesthetic production, but also a mode of theoretical engagement – a way one might feel a politics in aesthetics and through such feeling, deploy both. The pleasure of mimetic reverberation might be understood as the subversive innovation that takes place in the cyclicity of the feedback loop, of sublimity’s conservation, of the witch’s oscillation between capture and flight. Such subversive innovation might take the form of acknowledging, for example, the metal-ness of Longinus’ lament: “Alas! I fear that for such men as we are it is better to serve than to be free” (1890, XLIV.10). Such subversive innovation might appear unexpectedly at a SunnO))) show, as the unbearable noise works its way into the skin, in the form of an unarticulated and fugitive thought, vibrating beneath the cohesions of subjecthood: I am metal, and metal is me.

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Notes

1. For more on the notion of “bare life,” see Agamben (1998).
2. *μαιευτικός*. See “Maieutic”, *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*. January 20, 2014. oed.com.
3. With the notable exception of Hungarian black metal vocalist Attila Csihar, who often makes his own costumes.
4. There are, of course, notable exceptions to the homogeneity of black metal – for example the all-female black metal band Astarte from Greece.
5. For interviews with influential black metal musicians describing this shared ideology, see Michael Moynihan and Didrik Søderlind’s controversial *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (1998).
6. For more on the how ideas and labors of reproduction have shaped the historical and ideological formations of race, nation, and genealogy, see Alys Eve Weinbaum’s fantastic *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (2004).
7. I say “homeopathically” because I am interested in the performative confluence between the curse and the cure. Or to put it another way, I am interested in how SunnO)))’s invocation of metal’s affective tie to witches and the occult deploys a historically pathologized, gendered, and raced reproductivity to new aesthetic and political ends.

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